

the long road out of saigon by luminaryestuary

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, F/M, Gen, Military Backstory, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Vietnam War

Language: English

Characters: Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Will Byers

Relationships: Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-11

Updated: 2018-01-11

Packaged: 2022-04-03 15:21:01

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,256

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Hopper tells Joyce about his time in Vietnam.

One-shot. Post-Season 2.

the long road out of saigon

Four months after the Gate is closed, Will has an episode.

Or something like an episode, maybe.

Not the same as before.

Different.

Joyce had called him in a panic, from an emergency room payphone in the hospital the next town over – the hospital where Dr. Owens had taken a new position.

“He said he couldn’t breathe,” she’d said. “He said his heart felt like it was going to— to— to explode or something. I don’t know. I was scared, Hop. I thought it was like— like last time.”

Will had seemed fine after the episode passed, but Dr. Owens decided to keep him at the hospital for a little while, mostly for observation (and probably to reassure Joyce).

“Only a few hours,” he’d said, waving his hand. “I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. Not like before, anyway.”

The two resident doctors with him had been confused, but he just smiled that weird, beatific smile of his, and swept everyone out of the room.

So, here they are.

Hopper is sitting across from Joyce in a dimly lit corner of the hospital cafeteria, staring at his hands.

It’s late, later than either of them expected, but neither wants to get up and try to doze in the uncomfortable plastic chairs in the waiting room.

He wants a cigarette, but there are little signs in the cafeteria that say

NO SMOKING, and he bristles a little at that.

There's some public push to ban smoking in hospitals now.

No smoking, my ass, he thinks.

He hates hospitals.

The familiar, sterile smell pokes at that hole blown wide in his heart.

Hospitals remind him of Sara.

People should at least be allowed to smoke in hospital cafeterias, goddammit.

"What the hell am I going to do?" Her voice is tiny, afraid. She's just started putting the events of the past year behind her.

Hopper knows that this has taken her back, right back to those ugly months of uncertainty and terror.

"You said this wasn't like the other episodes, right?"

She nods, chewing on the edge of her thumbnail.

He drums his fingers on the table. "I think this is what Owens was talking about last year."

"You mean..."

"Yeah. Trauma. PTSD or whatever they're calling it now."

She glances away for a moment, then back. "Do you think he'll have to deal with this for his entire life? This trauma from— from—" Her voice breaks off and her dark eyes are wide, shiny.

Hopper presses his lips together. "No. You eventually learn to live with it."

There's a short pause where she swipes at her eyes, trying to discreetly scrub away tears. "What do you mean?"

He doesn't really know how to tell her about his time in the jungles

of Vietnam. There are awful things locked deep inside of him, things that have been buried since the very day that he left that godforsaken country.

“You just— you hold it. You get used to it. A few of the guys I know, shit plays over and over, like they’re there, re-living it. For the rest of us, that doesn’t happen too often. Mostly it’s just memories of what we went through. It’s a little easier, I guess.”

“How is that easier?” Joyce asks, and he can see sadness creasing the lines of her brow.

“Trust me, it is.”

Her lower lip trembles. “Do you think— do you think it will get easier for Will? Over time?”

Hopper nods, then rubs a hand over his beard. If he knows anything, he knows that time wears away at the jagged edges of tragedy.

Joyce takes a deep breath. Her shoulders bunch up near her ears, then release. She looks at him; it’s an intense expression, and he notices that the shimmer of tears in her eyes is gone. “How long did it take?”

“How long did what take?”

“For it to get easier.” She hesitates. “For you.”

“First year or so was the hardest,” he says. “It’s the hardest for everyone. It will be hard for Will too. Probably harder now that he’s had to deal with twice the amount of bullshit.”

Joyce accepts this, doesn’t argue with him. She just looks grim and determined, her mouth set in a hard line.

“Were you scared over there? In Vietnam?”

Her question takes him by surprise.

No one has ever really asked him that.

Not even Diane.

Hopper contemplates the large crack in the table they're sitting at.

"Yes. No." He shifts in his seat uncomfortably. "I don't know."

She is watching him closely as he responds.

By all accounts she should be exhausted, but her eyes are bright.

"I thought I was doing a great service for my country," he says. "It was the dumbest decision of my life." He remembers the exact day that he got on the bus to ship off, and the years stretch onward from there.

Joyce doesn't say anything, just looks at him, silently encouraging him to go on.

It's strange, he thinks, how she can speak so wordlessly to him.

How easily they communicate in silence.

They'd always been like that – "two peas in a pod" when they'd been really young, and "those goddamn troublemakers" when they'd been teenagers.

What are they now?

Hopper starts off slow, simple – tells her about basic training. How the drill sergeants screamed in their faces, broke them down and built them back up – haphazardly, sloppily in some cases. Took a bunch of scared boys and turned them into men, or whatever they thought men were supposed to be.

"I'm not sure if it actually worked on me," he jokes, and she just shakes her head at him with a smile, her eyes crinkled in amusement.

He tells her about the journey to the other side of the world – all the exotic places that he managed to catch a glimpse of.

He tells her about Vietnam, where the people look and sound so different than the people in Hawkins. How fascinating that had been

– at first, anyway.

Joyce leans forward at some point, her elbows on the table and her arms crossed. She looks incredibly engrossed in the stories he's telling her; stories that he hasn't really ever told anyone.

He tells her about lying awake at night, listening to mortars fire in the distance, the shells exploding outside of their base camp, the ground shaking with each strike.

He describes how dark the night sky was – how you could see thousands and thousands of stars, many more than you could see back in the States.

He tells her about the skinny stray dog that arrived with a group of returning soldiers one day. It came in and made itself right at home, like it was meant to be there. They joked about the dog being their camp mascot, and named him Charlie, after their enemy – because what was Army life during the Vietnam War without a little morbid humor?

He tells her that Charlie died after a shell found its way into the camp one night. It took a couple of the men in his platoon too, along with half of the barracks. He dug a hole and buried that dog with his own two hands; his fellow soldiers were sent home in coffins. He tells her that the shell struck just so – the room beside his was a scorched mess, but his wasn't, and he was still alive, somehow.

There is a point where his voice trails off; the darker memories are there, just beneath the surface, and he's not so sure that he wants to draw upon them.

Joyce reaches across the table and puts her hands on his – both hands, not just one. Her fingers are cold, so he curls them into his palms. It feels natural, almost reflexive, but he wonders if it's too much, too intimate.

She's still grieving, after all.

The seconds seem to stretch out into minutes, but Joyce doesn't pull away.

She wants him to keep talking, so he does.

Hopper tells her about watching walls of napalm roll through the jungles, incinerating everything from the ground up. He watched people melt, unable to put out the flames on their skin, their flesh falling away.

He tells her about the first time he found remains after a napalm strike – a mother and her baby, charred beyond recognition. He vomited because of the smell. After a few weeks, the blackened corpses didn't bother him anymore.

He tells her that sometimes at night, when he's falling asleep, he can still hear screaming.

Women. Children. Men.

It doesn't matter who they were - enemy, ally, civilian. It never mattered. He hears them all.

He tells her about watching the sun come up on his twenty-second birthday, while on patrol in the bush. Thirty minutes later, he watched one of his friends die – shot in the head, yelling one moment and gone the next. He spent that day with blood and brains all over his fatigues, the smells of copper and shit and sweat hanging in the air.

His eyes sting a little, but he pushes it aside like he always does.

He's not going to cry in this dingy cafeteria, especially not over something that happened twenty goddamn years ago.

The last thing he tells her about is departing Saigon after his tour of duty was over; watching it disappear behind him, so glad to be leaving and yet so ashamed that he escaped with his life and limbs.

Joyce skims her thumbs over his knuckles, gazing at him, not with pity, but something else.

"I'm glad you made it home," she says, gently, quietly.

Hopper doesn't know how to respond, because he lives with guilt

every single day.

The guilt of being alive when all those other soldiers are dead or maimed.

The guilt of being alive when Sara is gone.

“Sometimes I wish I hadn’t,” he says, and he can’t even look Joyce in the eye as he says it.

He doesn’t tell her that he’s wondered if he paid the ultimate price anyway – his life in exchange for the life of his child.

Her grip on his hands tightens, but when he looks up, her face is so soft, so open.

He starts to understand, then.

He’s gone with her through hell and back – twice – and he knows that he’d do it all over again and then some.

She’s dealt with so much and he’s always admired her ability to pull herself up and keep moving, lighter than air.

He doesn’t know how she does it; he’s carried all of this shit with him for years, limping beneath it at times and immobile at others, only staggering forward in increments because he’s too damn scared of drowning.

Joyce is strong, a fighter if he’s ever seen one.

He’s just a liability.

Yet she’s here, walking beside him, peeling the weight from his shoulders, taking the pieces of his pain in her hands and letting them drift away on the wind.

Hopper knows that he’s been lost to her for some time now, but each time he thinks he’s hit the edge of that deep longing, she gives him another reason to love her more.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

They both turn and blink at Dr. Owens, who is smiling at them like he knows something they don't. He looks from Hopper to Joyce, and then back again, somewhat expectantly.

"Ah— no," Hopper stammers, his hands breaking away from hers, and the sudden absence of her touch is almost painful.

"Well, good," he says, "because I think Sir Will is quite tired, and ready to go home now."

They all walk out to the parking lot together after Dr. Owens discusses a few things with Joyce. The late night air is crisp and clear, the winter constellations bright in the black of the sky.

Hopper almost forgets to breathe when Joyce twines her fingers with his, their hands hidden between them.

When they arrive at Joyce's car, Will turns to him, dark circles under his eyes. "Say hi to El for me," he says sleepily, opening the door and collapsing into the front passenger seat.

"He'll be asleep in about two minutes," Joyce says, and the stress of the day is still hanging on to the fine lines around her eyes, but only by a thread. "Thanks for coming, Hop. I appreciate it."

He shrugs. "I'm glad you called."

"I am too," she replies, "and thanks for sharing all of that with me." Before he can do anything, she stands on her tiptoes and presses a ghost of a kiss to the corner of his lips, as if she'd aimed for his cheek and missed.

"Bye, Hop," she says, and there is a strange little impish grin on her face.

Joyce gets in the car and drives away. He lights a cigarette, hand cupped around the flame, watching her taillights become pinpoints of red in the distance.

Hopper thinks about her lips grazing his, and sighs.

He wants to tell her so many things – he wants to tell her about New

York, and Diane, and Sara.

He wants to tell her about everything that she missed during their long absence from each other, before life threw them back together.

He wants to tell her that he loves her, but mostly—

Mostly, he wants to tell her that he's wandered the long road out of Saigon for years, and now he can finally see the way home.

Author's Note:

i. I'm very interested to see if they ever flash back to Hopper's time in Vietnam. I think it forms a large part of his character - my father is a Vietnam veteran and his service definitely impacted his life in a huge way.

ii. Writing Hopper is such a challenge! I really enjoy it though.

iii. I am obviously far too young to be a Vietnam vet, so if I've gotten any terminology wrong, my apologies!